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THE PREDICTABILITY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING RESULTS.

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IF LANGUAGE CAN BE CONSIDERED AS ONE FORM AMONG SEVERAL BY MEANS OF WHICH MEANING CAN BE CONCEIVED AND TRANSFERRED, THEN IT FOLLOWS THAT LANGUAGE TEACHING SHOULD LEAD ABOVE ALL TO THE FACILE TRANSFER OF MEANING. ACCEPTANCE OF THIS CONCEPT WILL INFLUENCE THE CHOICE OF METHODS AND MATERIALS BEST SUITED TO YIELD THIS RESULT. THE TEACHER'S PURPOSE IS TO AID THE LEARNER TO EFFECT CHANGES IN HIMSELF BY DEMONSTRATING WHAT IT IS POSSIBLE FOR HIM TO DO, ACHIEVE, OR BECOME BY LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE. LEARNING ACTIVITIES MUST BE LINKED TO GOALS THAT ARE STUDENT-CENTERED RATHER THAN TEACHER-ORIENTED. "SCIENTIFIC" APTITUDE TESTS, BASED NOT ON LANGUAGE BUT ON LINGUISTICS, CANNOT BE CONSIDERED TOO SERIOUSLY IN PREDICTING A STUDENT'S SUCCESS IN SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING. A STUDENT WHO ATTACHES VERY LIMITED MEANING TO WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS WHICH DESCRIBE HIS PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT OR ABSTRACT CONCEPTS IN HIS NATIVE LANGUAGE IS NOT LIKELY TO PROMISE SUCCESS AT SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE BASIS OF A TEST. IN ORDER FOR A STUDENT TO GAIN A PROFICIENCY COMMENSURATE WITH HIS INTELLECTUAL ABILITY, NOT ONLY MUST HE FOSSESS THE WILL TO UNDERGO CHANGE, BUT ALSO HIS LEARNING EXPERIENCE MUST BE GEARED TO HIS OWN LEVEL, AND IT MUST BE PATTERNED, EVALUATED, AND INTEGRATED WITH HIS PERSONAL-SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT. THIS PAPER WAS DELIVERED AT THE INTERAMERICAN CONGRESS OF LINGUISTICS, PHILOLOGY, AND LANGUAGE TEACHING, MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY, JANUARY 4-13, 1966. THE ARTICLE APPEARED IN "CONTACT," NUMBER 9, DECEMBER 1966, PAGES 2-11. (JH)

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The Predictability of Language Learning Results*

This paper is based on the fundamental fact and premise that all knowledge about language is gained in order to insure the learning of a language or of several languages in a manner which will lead to the facile transfer of meaning by means of them. This statement may be so obvious to many that it can hardly be the basis for a discussion of any value. However, in fact much of the history of language teaching and language learning indicates that this premise is not universally accepted.

Let us begin by examining the premise. Language has the single purpose of being the form and communicative vehicle of meaning which is present in the conceiving mind[1]). At the point of conception form and meaning are identical. At times this form remains unchanged as meaning is transferred, or communicated from the conceiving mind to the receptive mind. More complicated meaning may be transferred through reflective thinking[2]) from the original conceptual form to the communicative form. For example, if one is suddenly burned, the instant accompanying exclamation of pain is both the conceptual and the communicative form. But if a student is asked to give a definition of existentialism, he begins a complicated process of recalling meaning in a variety of verbalized forms, of organizing these into a totality suitable for a specific form of transference from his mind to that of the person who posed the question. It must be recognized that language only enters into the process of formulation and transfer of meaning. There is much in our backgrounds and in our environments which, though it is meaningful, remains latent and is not in any focus of attention. The routines of our daily lives, which constantly involve a great number of concepts which, even when seen or sensed in passing, remain meaningful without precise form because they are implicitly present but unverbalized since no focus of attention is upon them. Thus a speaker mounting a podium passes through a temporary environment of which he is conscious but which in detail may completely escape his attention and thus the language

*) An address delivered in Spanish at the Interamerican Congress of Linguistics, Philology and Language Teaching held at Montevideo, Uruguay, January 4 to 13, 1966. I am indebted to Daniel Rose, Graduate Research Assistant in the Department of Language Laboratories, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for assistance in its preparation.

1) Alfred Schutz, *Symbol, Reality and Society,* The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pp. 321—323.

2) The radically different nature of thought as opposed to sensory experience has received recent investigation. See: Erwin W. Strauss, "The Expression of Thinking," in James M. Edie (editor), *An Invitation to Phenomenology,* Chicago, Quadrangle, 1965, pp. 266—283.

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for a total description of the auditorium, though latently present in the recesses of his mind, is not all conceived as meaning.

The premises, therefore, can also be more precisely clarified if it is noted that language is only one form among several by means of which meaning can be conceived and transferred. This in total can be called forms of self-expression and encompass not only all the art forms but also such a simple movement as tapping one's fingers as a demonstration of impatience.

For brevity, it will be necessary that we accept the idea of meaning simply as the identity which each individual gives to any focus of his attention. Meaning in this sense is an individual capacity of the mind and is not an inherent quality of language. In fact language itself has no meaning. The definitions given to words in dictionaries represent only a consensus of what individual minds generally accept as conceptual forms of universally reoccurring identical meanings in innumerable minds[3]). The more meaning can be made objective and subject to sensory perception, the more limited its individualization becomes. Thus a table in general is represented easily without great individual mutations. But a word like "justice" represents a concept so complex and so intangible that no such consensus of precise meanings can be established.

That language itself has no meaning *per se* can be demonstrated by the fact that the same sequence of phonemes represents different individual meanings because the individual minds are conditioned by different environments. Thus the utterance *burro* represents the meaning "burro" (an animal) in the Spanish mind but butter in the Italian mind. This is an over-simplification of the complexities of higher orders of thought. However, it does emphasize that what is commonly called misunderstanding arises from the fact that meaning in one mind does not transfer through language to exactly the same meaning in another mind.

It is, therefore, of prime importance that in learning or teaching language this principle of facile transfer of meaning be constantly kept in focus as the only purpose of such instruction[4]).

The primary emphases on meaning and on facility of transfer divide the instructional purpose into two distinct facets both of which must be developed simultaneously at all times in order to achieve permanent results at any level of language learning.

Since meaning is an individualized focus of attention it is imperative that the content of language learning be relevant to the frame of reference of each individual. Since most students of language cannot be given individual tutorial

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[3]) Richard F. Grabau, "Existential Universals," in James M. Edie (editor), *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, Chicago, Quadrangle, 1965, pp. 157—158.

[4]) "Durkheim's analysis demonstrates the essential significance of the symbolic in social life. The meaning of objects does not derive from properties inherent in them, but rather from their being symbols of the collective representations of society. Meaning and value are social attributes, not objective properties of material phenomena." Edward A. Tiryakian, *Sociologism and Existentialism*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1962, p. 34.

instruction, it follows that students in homogeneous groups could, because of common interest, be presented material which would have the greatest probability of relevance to the members of the group. This concern for relevance becomes more complicated with the advancing age of students. Children in the primary schools have common and simple meanings to express and these are more distinctly related to the environment. But with education and experience, this expansion of meaning tends to divert attention from the physical environment to the abstract concepts which form the basis for more and more complex thought. Thus the content of language instruction must, to be relevant, tend to become less environmentally orientated and more abstract in order to maintain the student's focus of attention on meaning he is strongly motivated to express because of his own intent and desire.

It has been contended in English-speaking countries that children learn a foreign language much more readily than older children of secondary-school level or adults. It is my contention that controlled experiments would demonstrate that the decline in language learning success with advancing chronological age is directly dependent upon the static nature of the content. It is hardly conceivable that in any other academic discipline a textbook for children at various age levels and for adults would all have identical content. We have biology texts for junior high school, for senior high school and for university students which are decidedly different in subject matter, in presentation, in language, even in format. But in foreign language study we have texts for these same levels of education and even for younger children which offer the students the same content often in identical language. Even elementary common sense would assure us that no content can remain relevant to the focus of attention of the maturing student which concerns itself with descriptions of the bare necessities of daily living. In addition these descriptions are contrived into conversations of fantasy which in reality never are conducted. We gain the impression that visiting a foreign country is an endless routine of small talk with shopkeepers and those who render service. The result of such instruction is obvious. The maturing student negatively motivated quickly drops the study of a foreign language.

The emphasis on meaning as the key to language learning success also places the concentration on the learner. This statement appears so obvious as to be insultingly stupid. But already it has been shown that the content of materials is not designed with the learner in mind as he is but rather as what the writer thinks he should be. Similarly we find in the research that is reported that very little attention in studies of achievement is given to a preliminary analysis of the materials, but rather that these are accepted as valid. To concern oneself then with method in presenting these materials wrongly emphasizes the teacher and not the student in language learning. For foreign language learning to be successful it must be relevant to the learning individual and instruction must be conducted in a manner that will constantly insure learning at each step.

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[5]) John B. Carroll and Stanley M. Sapon, *Modern Language Aptitude Test*, New York: Psychological Corporation, 1955.

The same lack of concentration on the learner and his individual focus of attention is evident in the attempt to measure aptitude for foreign language learning. By the nature of such tests it must be assumed that aptitude is the learning potential of an individual which assures an observer that a body of knowledge can be learned by the individual under observation. Thus aptitude is not an innate capacity or an inclination to learn knowledge specifically defined but rather an observer's judgment of the individual's present state of mind compared with that state of mind which the designer of the standard of measurement has prescribed as necessary for successful learning in the general area under consideration.

The Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT)[5]) proposes to predict the probable degree of success an individual will have in second language learning given a certain score. However, the test is not predicated upon a consensus of the states of mind of successful language learners before they began their learning experience. Instead, accepted components of language learning are established as criteria and unfamiliarity with these components will describe the individual as lacking in aptitude. What is more disconcerting is the fact that the test is not based upon language but rather on linguistics. Form A, Part III, "Spelling Clues" is a case in point. If the individual taking the test had previously been trained in phonics, no doubt his score would be higher.

"Probability statements can never be strictly contributed by experience, even if we assume that all external perturbations and all observational errors are entirely eliminated[6])."

In fact, probability statements need the agent of human appraisal in order to be relevant to a specific situation. Thus, if the test were accepted as a valid measure it still does not give relevant predictive assurance of the individual's measure of successful learning of a foreign language.

But my greatest objection to this type of prognosis arises from the implication, not at all factually demonstrated, that one can objectively define successful achievement in language learning. Language is not linguistics. Linguistics is in essence a systematic analysis of language and has the appearance of science because it is systematic. But it is descriptive of language and not language itself. Therefore to construe the linguistic systematization as a clue to potential mastery of language confuses the existential manifestation with the essence of language which is meaning.

There is a further implication in the attempt to determine language aptitude through testing and this implication is that meaning in certain areas of human experience is universally established. A subject who can attach very limited meaning to words and expressions which describe the physical environment or abstract concepts and has even in his own language imperfect control of structures would demonstrate deficiencies which would yield a negative prognosis.

Professor Paul Pimsleur has stated in an address delivered in Berlin in 1964

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[6]) Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, New York, Harper Torchbook, 1964, p. 24.

that neither his nor any other aptitude test should be used to deprive anyone of language study[7]). Yet if a prognosis of low potential success is offered any subject on the basis of objective tests of aptitude, it certainly has an effect of deterring him from pursuing such study.

It is, therefore, my contention that aptitude to learn a second language cannot be defined and hence not measured even in general categories on a broad scale.

It is evident, however, that except in cases of extreme physical or mental handicap all human beings can express some meaning and receive it through the medium of spoken language. The range of language in this regard may vary between certain restricted limits but the ability to speak and comprehend spoken language is an endowment of all human beings. The extent of his ability is dependent upon the social and cultural milieu and the patterns of meaning it engenders. Therefore, the first step in obtaining successful second language learning results must depend upon an evolution of the extent to which the individual has expanded his focus of attention not only in relation to the environment, but also to the abstract deductions and meanings which are related to that environment.

It is of importance to note that the studies conducted on fundamental patterns of spoken language have revealed that at the most elementary level spoken language expresses meaning related to subjective and primary needs. Thus the verbs, for example, "to have," "to be," "to wish," "to be able," "to know" and the like are of highest order and represent meaning which is quite universally distributed among all human beings but at the same time are elements of language with clusters of meaning. It appears then that in constructing initial patterns of second language instruction those meanings which are almost intuitively apprehended should be emphasized[8]).

The corollary to this approach is of equal importance but too often ignored; namely, that language cannot be successfully taught either in native or in second language study unless the meaning it is to evoke is verified as existing within the individual's focus of attention. If a subject is to learn language relating to a restaurant and has never had an experience of eating in one, it will be quite impossible to gain successful learning because the meaning remains either non-individualized or non-existent. In either case the lack of subjective development of meaning divests the learned language of its impetus for retention and oral expression.

If the conditions are favorable and indicate the premise of meaning, it is still necessary that that meaning be expressed to others who have similar focuses of attention. Thus we know from experience that oral language attains greater

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[7]) Paul Pimsleur, "Testing Language Aptitude," in *Papers and Reports of Groups and Committees* of the International Conference of Modern Foreign Language Teaching, Preprints, Part II, Berlin, Paedagogische Arbeitsstelle and Sekretariat Paedagogisches Zentrum, November, 1964, p. 49.

[8]) Basil Bernstein, "Social Structure, Language, and Learning," *Educational Research*, Vol. III, No. 3 (June, 1961), pp. 163—176.

fluency among individuals of common interests. In any relationship of human beings even one's native language is slow and halting until the areas of common meaning are established as a background for conversation. To have nothing to say implies that the presence of another individual encouraged no common meanings through which contact could be established and a reception of language as meaning assured.

I have previously alluded to physical and mental impediments to second language learning. Simple tests are available to determine the capacity to hear and the range of hearing ability, especially in the area of sound discrimination. But although the ability to speak in the sense of uttering sounds is obvious no students of second language are ordinarily evaluated on their ability to express themselves. If a student has little capacity to speak in his native language in more than simple sentences with few connectives it is highly improbable that he will ever successfully master second language structures in which relative clauses and those with verbs in the subjunctive are required. Thus we must evaluate not only meaning but the habitual expression of meaning in the case of each individual to determine the level at which second language learning can be begun and pursued with assurance of achievement[9]).

These factors will contribute to determining the rate at which this learning can progress. I am convinced that students who are identified as facile learners of second language have highly complex language structures to express them and also possess the ability to establish relations with others to achieve favorable receptivity of their own speech. Though the experimental proof is lacking there are strong indications which Professors Carroll and Sapon have publicly recognized that aptitude tests really indicate the potential initial rate of learning a second language and do not indicate the ultimate result of such learning. It has been the experience within some Peace Corps Training Groups at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that trainees who had taken the Modern Language Aptitude Test and had been ranked in the lowest group did ultimately as well as those in the upper group. In fact it is rare that any Peace Corps Trainees, who are selected without any reference to second language learning ability, are dropped because of inability to learn a second language.

These experiences have led us to believe that the second facet of the instructional purpose, the facile transfer of meaning, is developed not because of aptitude but because of motivation. An analysis of motivational factors brings into question the whole theory of aptitude since it is quite inconceivable that any learning can be achieved without them.

Individual motivation is most simply defined as the will to alter oneself. Predication of motivation on will also implies purpose. Therefore, the motivated individual wills to perform a purposeful act which will have an altering effect upon him. At the most elementary kinetic level this may mean nothing more

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[9]) J. Alan Pfeffer, *Grunddeutsch, Basic* (Spoken) *German Word List, Grundstufe,* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964; also *Grunddeutsch, Index of English Equivalents for the Basis* (Spoken) *German Word List, Grundstufe,* Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1965.

than changing one's position from which a change in the individual's relation to the space around him results. But in more abstract concepts this means that an individual cannot even divert his thoughts without constantly undergoing total change and these changes may be of any possible kind, physical, psychological, neurological and the like[10]).

The purpose of teaching is to aid individuals in effecting changes in themselves. This can be done by showing the individual what is possible for him to do, achieve or become in learning a second language. The teacher by revealing language as relevant to individuals, focuses the student's will to alter himself in certain areas of language learning possibility. Thus it is evident that the change can be more easily and permanently achieved if the subject is a willing participant in this process, in short, if the student is motivated.

Motivation can be interior or exterior. The latter more often is the most important and results from social and cultural factors. These factors often define goals and prescribe ways of attaining those goals. It is far easier to study these exterior factors negatively and thus the research of Professors Lambert[11]) and Fishman[12]) has revealed the strong social attitudes toward foreigners which deter learning of second languages. Thus in the evaluation of ethnic factors, especially in the eradication of dialect traces in the second language, an immigrant often becomes monolingual and loses his native language facility because of his over-positive attitude toward the second language. It is common also in areas of the world where two cultures exist together but at unequal levels that speech in one language becomes a mark of inferiority and then such speech develops in both groups a negative attitude toward that language and toward all languages other than the dominant one. It is necessary then in any situation where second language learning is not fully pursued that the basic attitudes of the individuals involved be explored to avoid such barriers to learning[13]).

On the individual level motivation can be externally stimulated by finding the point of contact at which the subject realizes that he has direct interest in the material to be learned. It has been observed, with strong intimations that these assumptions are correct, that the high motivation of Peace Corps Volunteers in the learning of exotic languages lies in the fact that each individual has a binding commitment to the social group, to an ideal, and to the language and

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10) "It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience." John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York, Macmillan, 1916, pp. 89—90. This is also a point A. N. Whitehead makes throughout *Process and Reality*, New York, Macmillan, 1929.

11) Robert C. Gardner and Wallace E. Lambert, "Motivational Variables in Second-Language Acquisitions," *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1959), pp. 266—272.

12) Joshua A. Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States*, A Final Report to the Office of Education, Language Research Section, under Contract SAE-8729. The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1966.

13) Wallace E. Lambert, "A Study of the Role of Social Motivation in Second Language Learning" *National Defense Education Act*, Title VI, Project No. 8817, June, 1960.

is seeking of his own will to effect changes in himself to conform to the total complex standard. This would seem to indicate that students, grouped not primarily by ability, as Skinner has suggested for optimum success in learning[14]), but by the greatest number of primary motivational factors, would be more certain of success in second language learning than scores on aptitude tests would predict.

Since we recognize that language is indispensible to man because of his constant will to express himself, effective motivational factors which stimulate foreign language learning already exist in each individual. I am certain that the will to gain proficiency in a second language is too often impeded rather than positively stimulated.

Perhaps the most formidable barrier to the prediction of success in language learning stems from the fact that educators, not being certain of what the processes of learning are, develop systems of learning which are modeled on systems of teaching and focus attention on teacher goals and attitudes rather than on those of the students.

In a recent work Hullfish and Smith, after an extensive exploration of the literature concerned with learning research, conclude that in addition to the will to undergo change the learner must experience four basic conditions of learning which Thorpe and Schmuller had already, among a variety of other conditions, set forth in 1953[15]). As will be readily seen these same conditions apply to second language learning and can serve as a most adequate guide to facilitating the transfer of meaning.

"1.*) The learning is geared to the learner's level — when it is compatible with the learner's physical and intellectual ability.

2. The learning is patterned — when the learner can see meaningful relationships between the activity and the goal.

3. The learning is evaluated — when the learner has some way of knowing what progress he is making.

4. The learning is integrated with personal-social development — when the learner experiences satisfactory growth and adjustment."

It will be noted at once that in these four conditions the learner's acquisition of meaning as a focus of attention in its fullest personal, social and cultural interrelationships is inherent. It is, therefore, completely self-defeating to have students perform useless language learning drills without attaching any meaning to them. This does not imply that mimicry to learn sounds, sound patterns, sound discrimination and the like are not valuable learning devices provided a student understands their purpose and why he is performing them. Here

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[14]) B. F. Skinner, "Why We Need Teaching Machines," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1961), pp. 377—398.

[15]) H. Gordon Hullfish and Philip G. Smith, *Reflective Thinking: The Method of Education*, New York, Dodd, Mead, 1961, pp. 170—171.

*) The numbering is my own.

language also becomes a kinetic exercise and exercise of the voice organs is a necessary corollary in acquiring fluency. Purposeful memorization can also be accelerated and permanent retention more readily assured, if every effort is made to develop integrated associations with meaning. In the former area the language laboratory has its most effective teaching function, in the latter the teacher alone can be the primary stimulus.

I have noted elsewhere[18]) that teachers of second language learning are too engrossed in method and not in transfer of meaning. No one can define language in such terms that one can ever objectively set standards of proficiency. It is generally assumed that a person is proficient in his native language even though the language corpus itself is not defined. In second language learning standards of proficiency have been devised which are not relevant even to one's native language or to one's ability to transfer meaning. In practice we accept what in theory we abhor. An audience will listen with interest, satisfaction and involvement to a discourse by a foreigner using the native language of the group he is addressing even though the presentation fails in many ways to meet the group standards of linguistic structure, pronunciation and intonation. But the good will of the listeners tempers their critical faculties and makes the speaker bold so that meaning is transferred to receptive minds without consideration of barriers that in instructional settings would be causes for failure.

The prediction of successful acquisition of proficiency in language learning cannot in the light of these considerations be gauged by aptitude tests. In fact, these tests attempt to evaluate only the potential acquisition of skills which can only follow at a secondary level the motivation level in language learning. And at this latter level the teacher alone holds the clue to future successful learning. Through the teacher language becomes something living and relevant to each individual student. Through the teacher's own attitudes and total performance as a human being, the values of second language learning must become apparent. And only through the teacher's demonstration of developing spirals of meaning and facility to transfer that meaning can successful involvement of the individual will to participate be achieved. But in the final analysis the prediction of language learning success is dependent on teacher skills, if we construe "teacher" in its broadest context of any individual guiding another. Yet if we concern ourselves only with professional teachers then we must admit that without stressing teacher development and profound academic preparation for language teaching, predictability of successful acquisition of proficiency remains meaningless. As a corollary if we regard language as so basic a function of human nature, then all human beings should be considered generally as educable in second language learning. Then the very best teachers should be placed with those students whose focus of attention is limited and whose facility to transfer meaning even in the native language is restricted by linguistic, psychological and social factors.

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[18]) Robert F. Roeming, "Issues We Must Face," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. XLIX, No. 5 (May, 1965), p. 309.

It is my hope that though we are making improvements through methods, we can soon gain a far deeper insight into the learning and teaching aspects of second language learning so that we can more knowingly evaluate the corpus of any language in relation to meaning and by extension in relation to the focus of attention of students generally involved so that we can with conviction and purpose foresee the changes which we want students to will within themselves.

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